

# PD WEEKLY, VOL. 1, ISS. 3



*"Before the Town" by Paul Klee (German (born Switzerland), Münchenbuchsee 1879–1940 Muralto-Locarno) via The Metropolitan Museum of Art is licensed under CC0 1.0*

**BOOTH TARKINGTON**  
**CONRAD AIKEN**  
**RUTH LAURA WAINWRIGHT**  
**HARRY STEIN**

*In this issue, a short story about literature and show business, by Booth Tarkington, a literary marvel whose own works were adapted for the stage, film, and radio. A 1916 poetry cycle by Conrad Aiken also delves into life in front of and behind the footlights. Ruth Wainwright and Harry Stein finish this issue with 1950's sci-fi and 1940's hard-boiled detective fiction. --- Matt Pierard, Editor.*

## **TRUTH IS STRANGER THAN FICTION**

from the Internet Archive etext of *The Works of Booth Tarkington* (1918)

THE sudden popularity of Kistle Simmons' first novel, "The Heart of Alastair," astounded everybody acquainted with the young author except himself. Kistle Simmons had known since his boyhood that he was to be a celebrated person in one way or another, some day. It was thought very remarkable that his prodigious success brought about no change in his manner. Even when the sales of "Alastair" (as he presently spoke of the book) marked one hundred and fifty thousand copies, he showed no symptoms of suffocation. The very tributes to his sang-froid failed to impress him.

His publisher got him at once to New York and led him about. At a reception he heard a woman whisper to a male companion: "The wonderful new novelist, Kistle Simmons, is here this afternoon; they say he's charming — so unconscious." And the nasty reply: "Yes, just as unconscious as if he oughtn't to be shot at dawn!" Kistle was as unaffected by the coarse jealousy of the man as by the little tribute of the lady.

He remained unperturbed when the newspapers of Mill City, Pa., where he lived, flared headlines on their front pages announcing: "Frohman's Secure Dramatic Rights Alastair. Theatrical Honours For Mill City Novelist." Kistle Simmons' father, immodestly flushed, stopped business men on the street to tell them that there had appeared in all his son's clippings "not one single unfavourable review"; the reviews, indeed, almost outpraised the advertisements. The privilege of translation was sought. "The Heart of Alastair" was soon to enliven palace boudoir and cotter's hearth in every European fatherland, including the Scandinavian. There was no fly in the ambrosia that Kistle Simmons, aged twenty-six, sedately digested.

His relatives and close friends were offensively drunken with pride, but journalistic visitors who wrote "Chats With Our Authors in Their Homes"

cordially mentioned the young genius' modesty. It is true that Kistle did not like to talk of himself or to discuss his works. As he afterward told a girl, some subjects are too sacred. ... He did, however, speak coldly of a war that broke out at about the time "Alastair" reached a sale of a hundred thousand copies. That war was unpopular with the whole Simmons family. They thought it was given altogether too much publicity.

Kistle Simmons had lived in his story as it was being written, and it remained actual to its author. It could not be precisely called a creation. It was, in fact, an assembled novel; and yet "Alastair," much more than Mill City, Pa., seemed lifelike to Kistle Simmons. For example, even at the uncongenial technical school to which Kistle had been forwarded at a hazard to study bridge-building during an unusually nebulous adolescence, he had been attended by an imaginary "man" with whose respectful humour he was much more concerned than with the computation of strains. All the male characters (except the servants) in "Alastair" had valets. Until royalties began to come in so handsomely, the Simmons family were served by one employee, always a mature German woman, who did the cooking; but they spoke of her as "the maid."

It was when one hundred and sixty thousand copies of "Alastair" had been sold that Kistle was swept into the love adventure that had so radical an influence on all his later work. To understand Kistle's conduct in that curious affair better than Mr. Clinefeldt did, it is necessary to bear in mind, first, that Mr. Clinefeldt was unlettered, and, second, that Kistle, at the time of the adventure, breathed only in the air of "Alastair." Students and devotees of Simmons will find old pleasures served anew in the pale sketch of "Alastair" here timorously attempted.

John Trevylian, the hero of the novel, was quite American to the core. (During the earlier growth of the manuscript his name had been Alwyn Trevylian, but Kistle had supplanted Alwyn with John when he changed the heroine's given name from Yvonne to Alastair, as Alwyn made both hero and heroine begin with "Al" and did not seem very

inventive. Besides, John was manlier, anyhow — and stronger.) John Trevelylian was a straight, clean-limbed, smooth-shaven American — yes, always an American to the core — age six-and-twenty, with a square chin like his father's and grandfather's (the Trevelylian chin) and deep-set eyes and an enigmatic smile which had puzzled a great many people in various peculiar parts of the world.

We find him wearing his riding togs, idling on the terrace of Arundel House, Lord Grydville's seat in Somerset, and flicking the ash from a monogrammed cigarette as he listens in a half reverie to Lord Grydville's Hungarian band playing wild, free fantasias in the Great Hall, where the other guests, including the Prime Minister, are having tea. John Trevelylian, citizen of the world at large, as he half-laughingly dubbed himself, had retained few illusions; he had travelled much, seen much — and suffered much! This last, a shrewd observer would have learned from one glance at the bronzed, well-chiselled features, and the firm-knit figure whose muscles of steel were not wholly disguised even by the perfect coat built by Crisp, king of London tailors, who had once refused to build clothes for an Imperial Royalty on the ground that the latter would not know how to wear them.

Yes; John Trevelylian had loved — and suffered! (Nowhere may we discover Kistle Simmons 9 subtlety better exemplified than in the wholly convincing intimation that, although John Trevelylian had committed sins — not petty sins; never those, but Great Sins — he had never in his life deviated by a hair's breadth, or to the most sensitive criticism, from the strictest path of honour.) Women, it was whispered, had died for John Trevelylian. And yet, if they had suffered for him, he had suffered more for them. All Rome rang with the story of his heroic protection of the Princess Traganza's reputation and the fair name of Casa Banuccio, a secret sacrifice which well-nigh cost him fame and fortune — ay, even life itself. And now, here at last on this stately terrace where the fragrance of his cigarette mingled with the scent of eglantine and the heavily drifting odour of Arundel House's roses (famous throughout all broad England) a girl's face danced before him on the breath of the clematis, and a girl's voice

called to him mockingly in the lilt of the violins.

"Tush," he muttered, impatiently, flicking the\* ash from his now half -consumed cigarette. "One would think me as callow as when I pulled stroke on the 'Varsity, eight years ago. Heigho!" He laughed lightly. "What would Burgess think of me?" .

Burgess was Trevylian\*s man.

Was it only a week ago that he, John Trevylian, had first seen his Lady-on-the-Bough? He had been hunting with the Arundel Hounds; had lost his way, and, much disgusted, was riding slowly home-ward down a byroad, his square chin deep in his immaculate hunting stock, when a laughing voice had called to him, out of the clouds, apparently: "Whither away, Sir Knight of the Rueful Countenance?"

His first sensation was one of annoyance, but, glancing over a garden wall as he instinctively drew the rein of his thoroughbred, he looked for the first time into the violet velvet eyes of Alastair Boleyn — ay, and drank deep of them, too. She was cozily ensconced in an embowering oak in the midst of this shadowy, old-world garden, and, with a rare, old book with a deeply tooled binding held carelessly in her hand, had evidently been watching his chagrined approach with profound amusement. She wore a fresh primrose in her hair; another tip-tilted saucily at Trevylian from between her curved red lips. Trevylian laughingly swept her an extravagant salute with his hat.

"Why do you mock me, Lady-on-the-Bough?"

"Because I do choose, Sir Knight of the Rueful Countenance!"

The play of suchlike railleries between these two is continued for several chapters and proved interesting to about five hundred and thirty thousand eight hundred and twenty-nine people, estimated on the basis of three readers to each copy sold. And during the summer following the publication of "Alastair" numbers of undergraduates of both sexes

practised Kistle Simmons' dialogue on deck, beach, and veranda.

Suspense is maintained, also, throughout this fond wooing, because of Trevelyian's inability to discover who of what Alastair really was. Nobody knew anything about her and she would not tell even him her name, although he came back to the garden wall and talked with her every day. But he had plenty of names for her; he called her Lady-on-the-Bough, or Lady-in-the-Garden, or Primrose Lady, and, when he got to know her a little better, Ma'm-selle Frou-Frou, and DemoiseUe-of-the-Silken Ankles. She always sat in the tree.

One day she was not there. A note was placed in his hand by a ragged boy who dived into the gorse and was gone. John Trevelyian opened the note and (of course) read it. "Good-bye, brave Sir Knight. Our little comedy is over. Forget your Lady-on-the-Bough."

The next morning John Trevelyian left Arundel House. Lady Galbraith (that strange woman who somehow made one think of a snake and shiver slightly in spite of her imperial beauty) is now introduced. That is, she is introduced to the reader, as Kistle Simmons 9 severest critic (if he ever has one) must admit that Simmons never descends to the banal device of having his characters introduced to one another. There is no instance of a formal or informal presentation in "Alastair" or any other of his books. That is one of this author's special charms against dullness. Lady Galbraith and John Trevelyian met in a railway accident, which occurred on Trevelyian's journey to town from Arundel House. She was pinned beneath the wreck, uninjured; Burgess obtained the means to extricate her and John Trevelyian used it in such practical fashion that her first words to him were: "Mr.-Man-with-the-Saw " He called her gallantly, "Mistress Dimples," until later in the story when he is forced by the disclosure of her real character to a stern "Lady Galbraith," merely.

A perfectly appointed brougham was waiting for Lady Galbraith when they reached Waterloo Station after the accident. John Trevelyian drove home with

her. She rang for tea and the housemaid who answered the bell in cap and apron was John's Lady-on-the-Bough, Alastair Boleyn. She uttered a sharp, choked cry, then, recovering herself, said coldly, yet with a certain wildness : " Yes, my lady," and retired. Trevylian muttered some excuse to Lady Galbraith, whose lovely but snakelike eyes divined the cause of his agitation, and rushed from the house.

He plunged for a time into dissipation, hoping to forget how cheaply he had held himself. "I, John Trevylian, caught in a flirtation with a lady's maid ! " In the Row, at the opera, everywhere he saw the mocking eyes of Lady Galbraith fixed on him. One dawn he found Alastair Boleyn waiting for him on the sidewalk as he came out of the Russian Embassy after a night at baccarat, when, plunge as he would, he had won, and won, and won. Alastair no longer wore her housemaid's cap and apron. She was clad in magnificent sables; but of that his fevered eyes took no note. He would have passed her, but she laid a detaining hand on his arm. "Let me — let me explain," she quavered. "No, I beg you," he said simply, "I — I am unwell." And left her standing there.

He went to his chambers in Jermyn Street. And there, that night, among his old marbles, his Sheratons, and a few good things by Landseer and Rodin, he was found pacing restlessly up and down by his father, old Jack Trevylian.

Old Jack was a grim old New Yorker who had lived much in court (kings 9 , not law) and knew everybody worth knowing. He was a frightfully strong old man, muscularly; so strong that it often embarrassed him, because he would break cups and other things whenever he forgot how strong he was. He wore a fierce, closely trimmed white beard and was very direct. He was known everywhere by his sobriquet of "the Lion," though irreverently dubbed "the Pater" by his son.

"There is something you are trying to forget," said Old Jack, after one glance at the haggard face in Jermyn Street. "Tell Burgess to pack. We will go to Paris on the night express."

Two days later they were dining at Duval's, that last word of the *haut monde* in Parisian restaurants, with the Honourable Cedric Braylie, an Irish nobleman's younger son, commonly known as "the Stormy Petrel" and a good man to have at one's elbow in close fighting or in a pinch of any kind. "The Three," as the Parisians had learned to call old Jack, his son, and Cedric Braylie, were thoroughly mystified when a young Frenchman, the Marquis de Lagny, hitherto a stranger to them, rose from a near-by table and without provocation deliberately flicked John Trevelyian's square chin with a serviette, adding a few sharp words of insult to make his deadly purpose clear.

John Trevelyian was not the man to refuse such an opportunity; for the joy of fighting, it must be admitted, was deep-rooted in the Trevelyian blood. The meeting took place on the terrace of a vacant *ch&teau* at Charenton, and several reviewers said it was as good as anything in "*Sarascinesca*." One peculiar incident threw a faint light on the motives of De Lagny in forcing the quarrel upon John Trevelyian. The latter being an American, De Lagny (the best swordsman in Paris) little dreamed he would show any familiarity with the weapons chosen, which were swords; much less did he anticipate the masterly — almost indifferent — ease with which Trevelyian handled his blade. Dismayed and hard-pressed, De Lagny, fighting like a demon but feeling his strength beginning to fail, attempted a foul stroke known as *il Presto di Caesar Borgia* and wounded Trevelyian in the right forearm. The seconds, calling "Halt," immediately sprang in and knocked up the duelists' weapons. But as De Lagny's glittering point entered the sinewy wrist of John Trevelyian, old Jack, "the lion/" heard a smothered outcry in a woman's voice, and glancing up sharply, was not too late to catch a glimpse of the stricken face of Lady Galbraith retiring from a dismantled window of the old chateau.

"Have no fear, madame," said the grim old man, fiercely, "my son fences as well with his left hand as with his right!"

John Trevelyian's blood was up. He was in earnest now, and wary, alert, brilliant, fought with his left



hand even more masterly than he had with his right. He merely toyed with the desperate Frenchman, and then, tiring of the game (having twice disarmed him and twice returned his sword) placed him hors de combat by a thrust in tierce through the thigh. "You would have it," he said, simply. "I am sorry." "The Lion" looked all through the old chateau but found nothing except a silver mirror, broken, a handkerchief, some gloves marked "G," and a gold cigarette case with Lady Galbraith's coat of arms in rubies. These he placed in his pocket.

"The Stormy Petrel" received a mysterious telegram at the breakfast following the duel, and left Paris without explaining where he was going. "The Lion" and John went to Trouville for the bathing season and the strange episode of the Breton smugglers was the immediate sequence. Strolling on the beach at dusk, father and son were surprised by a party of fishermen, thrown into a smuggler's smack, and kidnapped. Treated with rough kindness, however, by their captors, they were finally landed at night on a bleak and little-known peninsula of the Scottish coast. The fishermen immediately put to sea again, but a well-known laugh rang out in the darkness and the Honourable Cedric Braylie stepped from behind a rock and greeted them merrily. It was he, "The Stormy Petrel," who had hired the smugglers to kidnap them and bring them to this wild peninsula, for he needed their help and there were reasons (which he begged them for the present not to ask) why their presence in this lonely spot should remain unknown. He asked them, simply, to trust him. Silently, father and son, each in turn, stepped forward and wrung "the Stormy Petrel's" hand. Then dim figures emerged from the gloomy mists, gillies who, "the Stormy Petrel" explained, were devoted to the cause that he served. He assigned one of the gillies as a guide to John Trevylian. There was a curious catch in Cedric Braylie's voice as he said:

"Jock Macallister, give your hand to Mr. Trevylian the younger. See that he does not stumble!" Jock Macallister did not speak, and, in the darkness, John Trevylian could make out only that his guide seemed young and agile, but the hand that was placed lightly in his sent a curious warmth through

his frame. It was a strangely delicate hand for a gilly.

After many a detour among the precipitous cliffs and bracken, the party finally found itself standing before a long, low rambling house of immense size and great age, which, "the Stormy Petrel" told them in a cautious voice, was called "Auld Cragg Manor." Soon after, John Trevelyan and "the Lion" were seated before a roaring fire in a huge old fireplace, with a half-effaced escutcheon chiselled on the stone mantelpiece, a great punchbowl on the table, pipes lit, and the Honourable Cedric Braylie acting as host. Jock Macallister had disappeared.

"If ever man stood in need of staunch friends," said "the Stormy Petrel" as he filled a glass for old Jack, "I am that man." And his teeth met sharply as he cocked an eye at his two guests. "Stout friends, I need, with no scruples against good, honest fighting. I cannot tell you all, as yet, but you know me too well to think I would ask you to do anything that would shame you. You shall know in good time. For the present I must only inform you that it has become necessary to secrete a certain Person, whom I cannot now name to you, from certain Other Persons. These Other Persons have it in their power to do That Person grave injury. That Person is now in this house, but will be compelled to remain secluded, even from you. It is true that I am asking you to ally yourselves with me on the illegal side of the affair, because the law is with That Person's enemies." (There was a gleam of laughter in the speaker's loyal Irish eyes.) "These Other Persons, in fact, are determined to gain possession of That Person's person, and Auld Cragg Manor is at this very moment practically in a state of siege. If the besiegers once obtain admission, That Person is lost. That is as much as I am permitted to tell you. Is it enough? Old friends, will you stand by me in this, my hour of need?"

It was then that "the Three," once more clasping hands, swore that great oath that they kept so well to defend Auld Cragg Manor — yes, to the end!

It was late on the following afternoon when John Trevelyan caught a glimpse of a trim-built youth

hastily crossing the courtyard of Auld Craggs, followed by several gillies armed with cudgels, and evidently returning from some scouting expedition. With an odd thrill he felt inexplicably that the face of this handsome boy had appeared to him at some former crisis in his life, though when and where he could not remember. The pouting lips, the abundant bronze-gold hair waving under the jaunty cap, the violet velvet eyes, the small waist, the high-arched feet and slender ankles fully revealed by the Highland kilts — the entire figure, in good truth, struck him as unusual for a "Hieland Laddie." And yet to John Trevelylian it seemed strangely familiar. Obeying a sudden impulse, he clutched one of the gillies by the arm. "Who is that?" he demanded huskily.

The gilly touched his forelock. "Milord, 'tis only Jock Macallister," he muttered. "Me ain blither, too, he is, saving your worship's presence," he added, as if feeling the need of corroborative details; and then, hastily but obsequiously releasing himself from the other's grasp, he glided silently into the Manor.

The closing episodes of "Alastair" are indicated by the chapter headings. "The Siege of Auld Craggs," "The Night Attack," "The Fight on the Peninsula," "Hard Pressed," "The Stormy Petrel Explains," and, "As the Law Ordains." The siege of Auld Craggs had grown daily more sinister, urged on by the surrounding cordon of local constables — half-wild brutes they were, in that lonely region — and a gang of London criminals brought thither and officered by hired detectives. At last, provisions exhausted, the defenders decided upon a sally, hoping to reach the coast and be taken off by Cedric's friends, the Breton smugglers. Headed by John Trevelylian, "the Lion" and "the Stormy Petrel," they dashed into the m616e, the doughty Three, with mighty strokes of their cudgels, laying all low before them.

They had almost won through, when John Trevelylian discovered Jock Macallister fighting by his side. Suddenly Jock was confronted by a slender but athletic figure in the uniform of a French officer. Something flashed in the air and Jock fell,

a thin line of scarlet on his white temple, and at sight of the lad's blood John Trevelylian, raging like an untamed tiger, went baresark. Throwing away his cudgel, he muttered the old Trevelylian battlecry, which his father's father had taught him in boyhood, and, depending only on those natural Anglo-Saxon weapons, his two strong hands, he went right into the thick of it. His adversaries seemed fairly to melt before him (not once, from cover to cover, does Kistle Simmons split an infinitive) and in ten seconds he fought his way to the French officer, who had sought shelter in the rear after wounding Jock.

"At last!" thundered Trevelylian, his right hand raised to fell the cowering Gaul.

"Nevaire, m'sieu!" cried an incisive voice, and De Lagny stepped gallantly between the two. "I am your enemy, m'sieu'," he said, simply. "But I admire you too greatly to see you, even though unwittingly, strike a woman. I save you, m'sieu', from ze remorse you would some day experience, m'sieu'!"

With a recoil of horror John Trevelylian recognized Lady Galbraith in the boots and dolman of the French Guards. She fainted, and at the same instant there rang out a sharp report, and Trevelylian felt a stinging pain in his left shoulder. The constables and London roughs, fearful lest their prey escape them, had summoned gunpowder to their aid. The revolver speaks again. And now, one of the gillies is down. Stubbornly, inch by inch, the defenders of Auld Craggs are beaten back, until, still fighting tooth and nail, but caught like rats in a trap, as "the Lion," swearing fearfully is heard to mutter, they are forced to seek refuge in the Manor once more. John Trevelylian, bearing the inanimate form of Jock Macallister on his uninjured shoulder, is the last to enter.

The gillies again barred the doors and made the defense temporarily secure with hastily constructed barricades, while Trevelylian tenderly deposited upon a divan his precious burden— now doubly precious, for Jock, opening those eyes of violet velvet, half-whispered and half-sobbed, with slowly returning consciousness:

"And so, though once you would not speak to me, yet at the last you have fought for me, Sir Knight of the Rueful Countenance!" And as the light of recognition broke upon John Trevelyian's face and he uttered a glad, choking cry, she blushed a little and rearranged her kilts somewhat, for her wound was but a scratch and her true knight knew Alastair Boleyn at last. Then deftly and daintily she dressed his own wound, while over and over he murmured:

"Demoiselle! My little Prou-Prou! My Lady-on-the-Bough!"

Nevertheless their situation was desperate. The "Petrel/\* while superintending the barricades, hastily explained matters to the Trevelyians. "That Person" was none other than Alastair Boleyn, whose history Cedric Braylie (her cousin and sincere friend from childhood) now cleared up. Lady Galbraith was Alastair's half-sister, both having had the same father, the Earl of Garth, who had been celebrated as the proudest and most whimsical man in England. By his will the great estate had all been left to Alastair, with the curious proviso — characteristic of the Earl, however — that if she ever entered domestic service the property should revert to her older sister Lady Galbraith. The latter, cleverly concealing this from Alastair (after the Earl's death) had made her believe herself penniless, and had induced her to act as lady's maid, until sought out and informed of the truth by other relatives and friends of the late Earl, among whom was "the Stormy Petrel."

Lady Galbraith then brought suit, claiming that Alastair had taken service as a domestic, but this could not be proven except by the testimony of Alastair herself. On that account the devoted "Petrel" had disguised her as "Jock" and brought her to this lonely spot, where her identity was soon discovered. Hence the siege. If the constables could effect an entrance, they would serve the writ, hale her to court, she would be compelled to testify that she had been a servant — for Alastair Boleyn could not lie — and thus not only lose the vast Garth estate, but also her social position, now, since her rescue

from Lady Galbraith, the highest in England.

"That is all. Perhaps I should have told you before," said Cedric, simply.

As "the Petrel"'s voice ceased to be heard, Alastair whispered brokenly to Trevylian:

"Do you despise me now? What was I to do? I did not know! I did not know!"

Her Knight of the Rueful Countenance only stroked the bronze-gold hair. No other answer was needed.

The heavy blows of a tree trunk used as a battering-ram upon the outer doors of Auld Craggs roused them to the hopelessness of their position. But "the Lion," with his inimitable coolness, was so little disturbed by the tumult without that he picked up a musty old book of Scotch Law from a table and began imperturbably to read. Suddenly he sprang to his feet with a violent exclamation.

Eagerly questioned as to the cause of his agitation at such a moment, he read aloud a clause from the law of Scotland, which "the Petrel"/ 9 who had been a barrister, recollected was still in force, though seldom used. It was to the effect that a married woman could not be compelled to testify to her own detriment without the consent of her husband\* All eyes then turned to Alastair. She blushed anew, and hung that little head.

"But," she said, simply, "I am not married."

"The lion's" great laugh thundered out on the still air of the room. "In Scotland," he shouted, "it is only necessary for a Lad and a Maid to declare before a witness that they are man and wife. That is a legal marriage. And," here he bent a merry glance upon his son, "I think I could find the Lad."

"And I the Maid," laughed "the Stormy Petrel," placing his cousin's hand in John Trevylian's sinewy clasp. "Tear away the barricades, gillies. Open wide the doors of Auld Craggs. We will make your

very enemies the witnesses!"

And as the elated gillies sprang to obey, John Trevylian whispered to his hard-won bride: "Alastair, my Maid! Lady-on-the-Bough. My little Ma'mselle Frou-Frou — Jock I Turn that dainty head to me. For I want it — here!"

And he touched his breast.

That is the brief and inadequate outline of Kistle Simmons' first novel. Icily analytical, one finds some little extravagance here and there, even a slight forcing of episode; but as the publishers' own magazine set forth, - Kistle Simmons was "too thorough a master craftsman, not to know how to tell any story well." The enthusiasm of the book's reception has been indicated; elaboration of the subject infringes upon the history of belles lettres, though a final detail is permissible.

Less than a month after the publication of "Alastair," Kistle Simmons, returning to Mill City from a business talk with his publishers in New York, found four people, three ladies and a drummer, reading his novel in a single parlour-car. With modest benevolence he smilingly revealed his identity and signed three of these books for three pleased owners, the three ladies. The drummer, however, to Kistle's intense amusement, did not understand at all; he seemed befogged and openly annoyed, and refused the proffered autograph with something like heat. He had borrowed the book from his niece, he said, and he was darn-sure she didn't want anybody's name in it but her own, let alone a stranger's. All the way to Mill City he kept glancing distrustfully, over the top of the book, at Kistle.

The publishers of "Alastair" had urged the young novelist to begin another manuscript at once, and Kistle, readily acquiescing, prepared himself for the conception of his second novel. The idea for "Alastair" — as he always mentioned to interviewers — had "come" to him during an early morning stroll in the country. Consistently, therefore, he now began to rise about dawn, and, taking a street-car to the end of the line, walked for an hour or so, to afford the idea for his next book an

opportunity of coming to him. For a time the idea, wherever it was, lurked reluctant, though he walked persistently, haunting the sunrise and keeping his mind open. He allowed no favouritism in the choice of a subject to incline him this way or that; he had, however, a growing impression that the forthcoming novel would be "along the lines of 'Alastair'," though even more romantic, perhaps more ethereal, with a "slightly hotter love interest," and a heroine, if possible, even archer and more merrily provocative of winsome railleries than Alastair Boleyn. But, of course, he did not know what the story would be. It had not "come." He continued his walks, keeping his consciousness passive and receptive.

Then, one daybreak, he happened upon something unexpected and strange — and dazzling. He had wandered down a byroad from the Pike, down a lane from the byroad, and was passing (quite unconcernedly) a little orchard behind a large new house. All round the house the lawn was neatly mown, but in the orchard the grass was long, almost knee-high. It was fragrant and dewy, glittering with myriads of little white diamonds in the sunrise, and dancing through it, with strange steps of unearthly grace, unshod and unhosed, Kistle Simmons beheld a lovely girl. Her hair, superbly red, blew from her shoulders on the keen breeze; and, over other and indefinite garments, she wore a gabardine of flame-coloured silk, which she held gathered above the wet reach of the tall grass. And, all unaware of a stranger's gaze, she crooned eerily to herself in a low-pitched monotone. Her eyes were bent upon the feet that flashed through the watery green grass like white shuttles. She came toward the enthralled watcher, dancing nearer and nearer. He leaned upon the picket fence, a slow smile, half-tender, half-bantering, parting his lips. She was within ten feet of him when she looked up, saw him, and stopped electrically in an attitude of instantaneous petrification. Her startled eyes — the eyes of a dryad — were blue.

He smiled a little more; he spoke to her, keeping his eyes fixed on hers. "No," he atoid, quizzically. "I shouldn't call them violet, precisely. Because they're not, you know. I believe we shall have to



say that they are iridescent turquoise, O Lady-of-the-Morning-Dew ! "

The lovely girl became even lovelier. Her face flamed brighter than her silken robe; almost as red, I wis, as her hair. She made one little consonant sound, like the beginning of a word, then ran. She trailed her things regardlessly. She was but a fiery streak, and ended in a flash and an explosion as she shot up the kitchen steps and banged the door behind her — but not before the ringing laugh that Kistle Simmons sent after her had sounded in her ears, with his pursuing cry:

"Anon, my Lady-of-the-Orchard-Dews! I'll come this way again I"

That was a radiant day for Simmons. It is not every novelist who is given a chapter from one of his own romances to live. Through hours bright with the lingering excitement of his adventure, a pair of iridescent turquoise eyes beamed upon him, half-mockingly, half-tenderly. The vamoose of the lady did not disturb him at all; it was as he would have had it. For women scurry, sometimes, when they cannot resist. That arrow-flight to the kitchen pleased him even better than if she had paused to answer him, beginning, "O Mr.-Man-Leaning-on-the Fence " That would come.

He slept little that night, but it was a happy insomnia. He rose while it was still dark, and dressed far more fastidiously than upon the preceding morning. Indeed, in new knickerbockers and plaited coat he looked not unlike his illustrator's idea of John Trevelyian. No Lady-of-the-Dews was visible when he reached the spot behind the orchard, whence he had yesterday beheld her; but he was little dismayed, for the sun yet sat upon the horizon.

He disposed himself serenely upon a rock near some bushes close to the picket fence, and, lighting a cigarette, carelessly flicked from it the ash — as soon as there was one. He waited. She would come. He knew it.

Presently he laughed a low laugh to himself. For

she came.

She wore the same costume as on the day before and had made the same omissions, though the latter were not apparent until she reached the tall grass of the orchard. She appeared upon a path which led round the house from the front door; she came thoughtfully and as if somewhat troubled. A faint uneasiness was manifest, not only in her expression but in her very walk, and in many little turns of the head as she glanced up and down the by-road and then up and down the lane, and over her shoulder in other directions, as if in expectancy of something distasteful. Had she cause for fear? It was not impossible that she was being watched from the house. By whom?

Kistle, wondering, sat motionless; and her iridescent turquoise eyes failed to detect his presence. By and by he would speak to her, not now. She would not turn away this time. Once more he laughed softly to himself.

Reassured by the morning silence, she entered the long grass of the orchard, and, preserving her draperies (as yesterday) from its dampness, began to move in a dance of wild, strange grace. Her small feet twinkled in rapid succession above the grass, like feet in the high-step of a cake-walk, while her shoulders swayed to the rhythm of the curious monotone she hummed — a reiterant, breathy, sing-song murmur of numbers, evoking in the mind of the spellbound listener the monotonous but unbearably stirring ululations of the Eastern music he had heard in dramas of the Orient. Over and over she chanted the same little numbers, as she swayed and high-stepped, crossing and recrossing the orchard in this most bizarre and fascinating performance ever beheld by the eye of man. At last she halted, beautifully flushed and panting, within a few steps of where she had stopped the day before, and as close to Kistle Simmons. And at that he rose, and, laughing lightly, bowed very low before her.

"A thousand salaams, O Maid-of-Bagdad," he said. "Thy servant salutes thee. I will bring thee ten thousand perfumes in a sandal-wood box with chasings of silver, O Fatimah-of-the-Alabaster-Ankles."

He had prophesied rightly; this time the lovely girl did not run away. Neither did she return his rallying smile; but she spoke. She said: "What?

"Maid-of-Bagdad," he returned, continuing to laugh whimsically, "thou art made of white marble. All of white marble. Thou art white and fair and nimble "

The lovely girl turned from him and took four decisive steps toward the house.

"Desert not this poor slave," laughed Kistle, extending his arms toward her beseechingly. "Else will I pour dust upon my head, rend my garments, and beg for dates in the bazaar. Stay, O Pearl of Persia, O Pearl above Price, to delight mine eyes dance once more. I pray thee, dance, and ..."

"Mr. Clinefeldt!" shouted the lovely girl in a loud, summoning voice. "Mr. Clinefeldt /" Instantly there burst out of the kitchen door a large man in his shirtsleeves, a thick, white cloud of lather obscuring his cheeks and chin. He was about sixty, but sudden and big.

"Here's that fellow I told you about," shouted the girl. "He's insultin' me again!"

It fell from a clear sky. Nothing led up to it gradually. Nothing checked the sickening descent of it. Nothing mitigated the strangling awfulness of it. Kistle Simmons, utterly well-intentioned, smiling, debonair, confident of charming with winsome raillery, had to take it right in the face. It landed full, a splashing horror.

"He's tryin' to talk to me!" shouted the lovely girl. Kistle Simmons stepped back from the fence, staring incredulously at the oncoming Mr. Clinefeldt.

"He tried to pick me up," she bayed.

"You are mistaken," Kistle managed to say, and, with a mistaken effort to continue in character, "O Maid "

"She haint no seeh a things mistaken," volunteered an incredibly spiteful coloured woman, projecting unexpectedly from the kitchen window. "Lam 'im good, Mist' Clinefeldt; he's a little liah!"

As nightmare approaches the riveted dreamer, came Mr. Clinefeldt toward the fated Simmons. Mr. Clinefeldt was fury-red above his lather. Although merely a retired glue manufacturer, he was of dumbfounding proportions.

"Bus' him open, Mr. Clinefeldt," shrieked the appalling negress, with insane rancor. "I seen him sneak 'long de road an' hide in 'em bushes an' peek froo de fence-pickers whiles yo' wife uz a-doin' 'em Dutch he'lf-exercises!"

"I didn't," gulped Kistle.

"You did!" said the Maid-of-Bagdad. "You did, too, you masher!"

Mr. Clinefeldt opened the back gate and debouched upon the lane — rapidly. His manner and appearance did not encourage a hope that he would be capable of understanding the spirit of banter in which Kistle had addressed the lovely girl. That bonhomie, that lightness of touch, which had so large a responsibility for the popularity of "Alastair," one felt would be incomprehensible to Mr. Clinefeldt. One could explain the incident, indeed, with rather more optimism, to a charging rhinoceros.

"Lam 'im good!" repeated the inimical cook, vociferously. "You done had hard enough work to coax yo' wife take 'at cure. She quit it sho' ef you low riffraff come spyin' on 'er an say what he say. He call 'er ole maid, an' make wuss talk 9 n 'at, too! I heerd 'im. Tol' 'er she \*uz all white". . . . She continued with unthinkable interpretations. Our race must expiate the crime of purloining her ancestors from the Congo.

Mr. Clinefeldt was quite close to Kistle. The fact that the lovely girl was his third wife and forty years his junior did not sensibly modify his dreadfully apparent purpose.

"You keep away from me/' urged Kistle, backing.  
"You're an old man and I don't want to hurt "

"Hit him, Jake," said the Lady.

"You bet I'll hit him!" roared Mr. Clinefeldt.  
"But first" — he curved the palm and fingers of his right hand concavely and used them as a scoop upon his densely lathered countenance — "first I'm a-goin' to wash his mouth with soap. You stand there, watch me." Mrs. Clinefeldt obeyed.

It was a great morning, also, for the coloured woman. Twenty minutes later, her shoulders still heaving in the throes of an unsullied joy, she brushed the dust of the lane from her master's legs with a whiskbroom. "Folks may tell you you's ole in yeahs, Mist' Clinefeldt," she said, with what remained of her voice, "but you suttinly got the stren'th in yo' han's — yes, an' feet! — of Samson of ole."

Kistle Simmons' second novel published the following spring amazed the reviewers by its contrast to "Alastair," and gave the world some idea of the startling range of imagination possessed by this novelist. The book was compared in corpuscles, virility, and the strength of its meat for strong men, to the novels of Zola, of Frank Norris, of Dostoiewski, of Theodore Dreiser — to the dramas of Strindberg and Brieux.

The first chapter is the pleasantest in the book\*  
It begins:

"Krug Hopjeece, the refuse contractor, sat in a ten-cent restaurant in a Pittsburg slum. Hopjeece breathed heavily as he ate, the exhalations of his breath gathering in a thick vapour on the window-pane. From upstairs came the shrieking of a child. It was being beaten. Hopjeece ate. With his horrible hairy hand he lifted the soup bone, dripping with grease, from the bowl, tearing the shreds of meat with his strong teeth and with his horrible black and broken nails. A rat, half-stifled with bubonic germs, crawled across his feet. Hopjeece ate. The soup bone had been thrown away at the

packing-house. Hopjeece ate.'

It was called "Sewage."

# **URNS AND MOVIES**

from the Internet Archive etext of *Turns and Movies and Other Tales in Verse* (1916) by Conrad Aiken

## **I. ROSE AND MURRAY**

After the movie, when the lights come up,  
He takes her powdered hand behind the wings ;  
She, all in yellow, like a buttercup,  
Lifts her white face, yearns up to him, and clings ;  
And with a silent, gliding step they move  
Over the footlights, in familiar glare,  
Panther'like in the Tango whirl of love,  
He fawning close on her with idiot stare.  
Swiftly they cross the stage. O lyric ease !  
The drunken music follows the sure feet,  
The swaying elbows, intergliding knees,  
Moving with slow precision on the beat.  
She was a waitress in a restaurant,  
He picked her up and taught her how to dance.  
Love'phrases that he whispered her still haunt.  
She feels his arms, lifts an appealing glance,  
But knows he spent last evening with Zudora ;  
And knows that certain changes are before her.

The brilliant spotlight circles them around,  
Flashing the spangles on her weighted dress.  
He mimics wooing her, without a sound,  
Flatters her with a smoothly smiled caress.  
He fears that she will some day queer his act ;  
Feeling her anger. He will quit her soon.  
He nods for faster music. He will contract  
Another partner, under another moon.  
Meanwhile, " smooth stuff." He lets his dry eyes flit  
Over the yellow faces there below ;  
Maybe he 'll cut down on his drinks a bit,  
Not to annoy her, and so spoil the show. . . .  
Zudora, waiting for her turn to come,  
Watches them from the wings, and fatly leers  
At the girl's younger face, so white and dumb,  
And the fixed, anguished eyes, ready for tears.  
She lies beside him, with a false wedding'ring,  
In a cheap room, with moonlight on the floor ;  
The moonlit curtains remind her much of spring,  
Of a spring evening on the Coney shore.  
And while he sleeps, knowing she ought to hate,  
She still clings to the lover that she knew, —  
The one that, with a pencil, on a plate,  
Drew a heart and wrote, " I 'd die for you."

## II. THE APOLLO TRIO

From acting profile parts in the " legit,"  
He came to this ; and he is sick of it.  
The singing part is easy. What he hates  
Is traveling with these damned degenerates,  
Tight 'trouserred, scented, both with women's hips,  
With penciled eyes, and lean vermillioned lips.  
Loving each other so, they pick on him, —  
Horse him, off stage and on. He smiles, is grim,  
Plays up the part, saving his final card  
Till Jones should dare to slap his face too hard.  
But what 's " too hard " ? — Meanwhile, four times  
a day  
He drinks, to make things pleasanter ; while they  
(Those damned degenerates) eat up cocaine.  
The call'boy calls him on. And once again  
With a crushed hat, long hair, and powdered face,  
Dressed as the villain, in black, he booms deep bass,  
Asks the fool question, takes the slap, and sings  
As if he did for the first time all those things.  
My God, how tired he is of hearing Jones,  
Simpereing sweetly in falsetto tones,  
" Chase me, boys, I issue trading'Stamps : "  
Tired of grease'paint, dirty clothes, and lamps.  
At ease on sawdust floors, he leans and drinks,  
Swapping old stories with the crowd ; or thinks,  
Roving a bleary green eye about the bar,  
Of the girl he loved, or the one time he was star.

## III. TWO MCNEILS

He skips out lithe and tense into the light,  
Throws off his gown, and smiling, lifts his hands  
With a theatric gesture, opening fingers,  
Like a vain child. And having rippled slowly  
Under the smooth white tights the gleaming muscles,  
Smiling again, he turns ; and lifts black weights, —  
Staggering, flushing deep his face and neck, —  
To drop them with a crash. She, sweet and blonde,  
Stands by (in white tights too), smiles at the people,  
Catching the handkerchief he tosses to her  
When he has wiped his hands ; and at the end,  
Feigning timidity, sits in a chair  
Which he heaves up to balance in his teeth.



But as she sits there, waving frantic hands,  
And sees his coarse red fist gesticulating,  
She looks down on him with a look of hatred,  
And wishes he would only burst a vein.  
" Where did you get that ring ?" he said to her,  
While they were waiting turn. She looked at it,  
Twisting her head to this side and to that  
To see it sparkle. " What is that to you ? "  
" That drummer gave it to you. I 've seen him watch  
you."  
" What if he does ? " " You cut it out, that 's all !  
Don't you forget that time that I half' killed Schmidt."  
She smiled at him. "Why drag that up again ? "  
Then, they went on, — he quivering, she cool. . . .  
And as she caught his handkerchief, she turned  
Disgusted from him, thinking of her lover ;  
And how he said in his delicious voice,  
" I 'll meet you Thursday night at halfpast ten."

#### IV. DUVAL'S BIRDS

The parrot, screeching, flew out into the darkness,  
Circled three times above the upturned faces  
With a great whirl of brilliant outspread wings,  
And then returned to stagger on her finger.  
She bowed and smiled, eliciting applause. . . .  
The property man hated her dirty birds.  
But it had taken years — yes, years — to train them,  
To shoulder flags, strike bells by tweaking strings,  
Or climb sedately little flights of stairs.  
When they were stubborn, she tapped them with a  
wand,  
And her eyes glittered a litde under the eyebrows.  
The red one flapped and flapped on a swinging wire ;  
The little white ones winked round yellow eyes.

#### V. GABRIEL DE FORD

He slips in through the stage'door, always singing ;  
Still singing, he slips out, without a word  
To stagcdoor man, or any of the others.  
All through his act, wagging upon each hand  
A grotesque manikin, he laughs and sings,  
Sings with a far'ofF ventriloquial voice  
Through fixed and smiling lips. Sometimes, not often,  
He barely moves his mouth, for a ghostly word.

You see his throat fill, or his nostrils quiver.  
But then, staring ahead with stretched white eyes,  
And never stirring, he throws his voice way off,  
Faintly under the stage, or in the wings,  
Creeping nearer, or fading to a whisper.  
And since he always sings and never talks,  
And flits by nervously, swinging his cane,  
Rumors are thick about him through the circuit.  
Some say he hates the women, and loves men:  
That once, out West, he tried to kiss a man,  
Was badly hurt, then almost killed himself.  
Others maintain a woman jilted him.  
But the one story they tell everywhere  
Is how, at his father's funeral, he threw his voice  
Suddenly into the coffin ; and all the mourners  
Jumped from their seats and ran, and women fainted,  
And the preacher stopped the service, white as wax.  
Zudora said a friend of hers had seen him  
Mooning alone at "Carmen." And at the end  
He cried like a baby : what do you think of that.

#### VI. VIOLET MOORE AND BERT MOORE

He thinks her little feet should pass  
Where dandelions star thickly grass ;  
Her hands should lift in sunlit air,  
Sea'wind should tangle up her hair.  
Green leaves, he says, have never heard  
A sweeter ragtime mockingbird,  
Nor has the moon'man ever seen,  
Or man in the spotlight, leering green,  
Such a beguiling, smiling queen.  
Her eyes, he says, are stars at dusk,  
Her mouth as sweet as red'roscmusk;  
And when she dances his young heart swells  
With flutes and viols and silver bells ;  
His brain is dizzy, his senses swim,  
When she slants her ragtime eyes at him. . . .  
Moonlight shadows, he bids her see,  
Move no more silently than she.  
It was this way, he says, she came,  
Into his cold heart, bearing flame.  
And now that his heart is all on fire  
Will she refuse his heart's desire ? —  
And O ! has the Moon Man ever seen  
(Or the spotlight devil, leering green)  
A sweeter shadow upon a screen ?

## VII. ZUDORA

Here on the pale beach, in the darkness ;  
With the full moon just to rise ;  
They sit alone, and look over the sea,  
Or into each others' eyes. . . .

She pokes her parasol into the sleepy sand,  
Or sifts the lazy whiteness through her hand.

" A lovely night," he says. " The moon,  
Comes up for you and me.  
Just like a blind old spotlight there,  
Fizzing across the sea ! "

She pays no heed, nor even turns her head :  
He slides his arm around her waist instead.

" Why don't we do a sketch together ? —  
Those songs you sing are swell.  
Where did you get them, anyway?  
They suit you awfully well."

She will not turn to him — will not resist.  
Impassive, she submits to being kissed.

" My husband wrote all four of them.  
You know, — my husband drowned.  
He was always sickly, soon depressed . . ."  
But still she hears the sound

Of a stateroom door shut hard,\* and footsteps going  
Swiftly and steadily ; and the dark sea flowing.

She hears the cold sea flowing, and sees his eyes  
Hollow with disenchantment, sick surprise, —

And hate of her whom he had loved too well. . . .  
She lowers her eyes, demurely prods a shell.

" Yes. We might do an act together.  
That would be very nice."  
He kisses her passionately, and thinks  
She 's carnal, but cold as ice.

## VIII. AMOROSA AND COMPANY

Well, there was still a sure hand, anyway,  
When she stood up alone, in a casket of light,  
In the jet velvet blackness ; and round her neck,  
And along her outstretched naked gleaming arms,  
Felt the cool python slowly coil and coil. . . .  
But that was for the snake, more than for her.  
And when that Russian upstart ran out dancing,  
Flinging her little knees up, so affected,  
And throwing her arms about so foolishly,  
The audience went half/crazy with applause !  
Pretty ? Well, if you call it pretty, to have  
That listless scanty flaxen hair, and eyes  
So sentimentally blue. When she was hired,  
She was half'starved, poor thing, and cried and cried,—  
And, really, it was half in pity she took her.  
And now to have her getting all the notice,  
With those ridiculous dances ! Hopping about,  
Frisking her hands up, perking her rat's head sideways,  
Smiling, or looking sad, running and jumping,  
Or toddling on her toes — it was disgusting.  
And as if that were n't enough, to have her men  
All whining round this girl like a lot of tomcats,  
Even her husband ! — (not that she wanted him).  
And then, to have that cornet player get up  
And give her a box of roses, on top of all ! . . .  
She wondered if her strength would fail her, sometimes ;  
And if, instead of smiling, when the girl  
Was given an encore (taking her hand to share it),  
She 'd suddenly burst out laughing and slap her face :  
The wretched thin little measly skin and bones !

— She paused, fatigued with combing out her hair,  
Sick of trying to get those scraps of tinsel,  
And stared at red mirrored eyes. She was getting old.

## IX. BAIN'S CATS AND RATS

Quiet, and almost bashful, and seldom looking  
Into the rows of eyes below and above,  
He went about his work as if alone ;  
His cats, upon their table, sat and yawned:  
Or, paws curled under, blinked their sleepy eyes.  
And one by one, with deft pale hand, he lifted  
Rats from a lidded box, and set each one  
On a little pedestal. And then a cat,

Black, with green insolent eyes, gravely and sleekly  
Stepped over them, and sniffed, and waved his tail,  
And glared at the spotlight with his ears laid back,  
And leapt back to the table The audience laughed  
Later, when one cat balked, he gave up weakly,  
And let the curtain fall, with scant applause.

Ten years before this he had lost his wife.  
He was a trapeze artist : in his act,  
While hanging from the trapeze by his legs,  
Lifted the girl up in a jeweled girdle  
Clenched in his teeth, and twirled her with his hands,  
In darkness, with the spotlight blazing on them.  
It was a love'match. — Many had envied them.  
But he was always queer, a moody man,  
And things got quickly on his nerves. The girl,  
Perhaps, had been too young. . . . But anyway,  
One night before his act they heard him scolding —  
" For Christ's sake, put less powder on your arms !  
Look at my clothes— look here ! "—And that same night  
He let her fall — or anyway, she fell,  
And died without a word. Soon after that  
He quit the trapeze work, and got these rats. . . .

Sometimes there on the stage, he heard himself  
Saying, until the words grew meaningless,  
Multiplying themselves in tireless rhythms,  
" I 'm sick of her. But how get rid of her ?  
Why don't I let her fall?— She's killing me ! "  
And then he 'd glance, half-scared, into the wings.

#### X. THE CORNET

When she came out, that white little Russian dancer,  
With her bright hair, and her eyes so young, so young,  
He suddenly lost his leader, and all the players,  
And only heard an immortal music sung, —  
Of dryads flashing in the green woods of April,  
On cobwebs trembling over the deep wet grass :  
Fleeing their shadows with laughter, with hands uplifted,  
Through the whirled sinister sun he saw them pass,—  
Lovely immortals gone, yet existing somewhere,  
Still somewhere laughing in woods of immortal green,  
Youth he had lived among fires, or dreamed of living,  
Lovers in youth once seen, or dreamed he had seen. . . .  
And watching her knees flash up, and her young hands  
beckon,

And the hair that streamed behind, and the taunting eyes,  
He felt this place dissolving in living darkness,  
And through the darkness he felt his childhood rise,  
Soft, and shining, and sweet, hands filled with petals. . . .  
And watching her dance, he was grateful to forget  
These fiddlers, leaning and drawing their bows together,  
And the tired fingers on the stops of his cornet.

## XI

Sitting in a cafe, and watching her reflection  
Smoke a cigarette, or drinking coffee,  
She laughed hard'heartedly at his dejection. ...  
He laid his cigarette down in his saucer,  
And stolid with despair  
Put his elbows on the table, ran his fingers through his hair.

Watching how her lips primmed, dusty in the mirror,  
To meet the gilded tip between her fingers,  
As the cigarette approached them in her hand :  
She told him he was seriously in error. . . .  
And noticing how her lips moved, in reflection,  
She thought it queer, she said,  
That in spite of all her warnings he should go and lose his  
head.

Just as she was smiling, the noisy music started ;  
She tapped upon the tablecloth in rhythm. . . .  
Were those blue eyes of hers so icyhearted ?  
How was it, otherwise, she could not like him ?  
Women were different, then,  
From these strangely childlike passionate selfish men. . . .

She rose and took his arm ; they slowly walked together  
Out through the maze of tables, people drinking,  
Into the windy void of rainy weather. . . .  
And in the taxi, sitting dark beside him,  
She moved, and touched his knee,  
And when he kissed her, hated him, but kissed him,  
passionately.

## XII. AERIAL DODDS

Ingratitude — the damned ingratitude !  
After these years, and all he 'd done for him,  
To run away like this without a word !  
Without so much as thanks, — and still a boy, —

Though he had taken him as a child and trained him !  
This moment, he could kill him with his hands,  
Wring his young neck. . . . And worst of all, to think,  
After he 'd poured out love on him so long,  
That he should run off with that rotten girl,  
That whore, who could n't dance, and could n't sing,  
Who only kept her job because, being shameless,  
She splashed about in the spotlight like a mermaid !  
My God ; he 'd kill him if he ever found him.  
Had he been cruel to him ? No, not cruel.  
Sure, he had whipped him sometimes, — once in a while, —  
Partly for discipline, of course. . . . But never  
More than to make him shrink, or his lips tremble,  
His cheeks a little white. Not more than that.  
And then, he had loved him so ! And given him things,  
All the money he needed, and all the clothes. . . .  
— And the boy had been a foundling to begin with !

He got up from his chair, groped in the darkness,  
And struck a match under the mantelpiece, —  
Watching it spurt from blue to yellow flame,  
Staring the room with agitated shadows.  
And one by one he lifted from the trunk  
The clothes the boy had worn : the soft-soled shoes ;  
The white ones with the sockets in the heels,  
For whirling in the swing ; the satin tights,  
And the broad golden girdle, crystal starred.  
He had looked lovely in this sleek white satin —  
And he remembered now the day they bought it ;  
And how he stood up, smiling, by the mirror,  
With big blue fearless eyes, and curly hair,  
Just as he looked, sitting in his trapeze,  
Wiping his hands so calm, and gazing down.  
His throat was just like ivory, in this lace. . . .  
And he had looked so slim, so like a child,  
So white and fragile !

And now, my God, he 'd gone.  
And he would never touch again that skin,  
So young and soft ; or have against his mouth  
Those curls ... or feel the long-tongued venomous whip  
Curl round those knees, and see the young mouth tremble.

XIII

How is it that I am now so softly awakened,  
My leaves shaken down with music ? —  
Darling, I love you.

It is not your mouth, for I have known mouths before, —  
Though your mouth is more alive than roses,  
Roses singing softly  
To green leaves after rain.

It is not your eyes, for I have dived often in eyes,—  
Though your eyes, even in the yellow glare of footlights,  
Are windows into eternal dusk.

Nor is it the live white flashing of your feet,  
Nor your gay hands, catching at motes in the spotlight ;  
Nor the abrupt thick music of your laughter,  
When, against the hideous backdrop,  
With all its crudities brilliantly lighted,  
Suddenly you catch sight of your alarming shadow,  
Whirling and contracting.

How is it,, then, that I am now so keenly aware,  
So sensitive to the surges of the wind, or the light,  
Heaving silently under blue seas of air ? —  
Darling, I love you, I am immersed in you.

It is not the unraveled night/time of your hair, —  
Though I grow drunk when you press it upon my face :  
And though when you gloss its length with a golden brush  
I am strings that tremble under a bow.

It was that night I saw you dancing,  
The whirl and impalpable float of your garment,  
Your throat lifted, your face aglow  
(Like waterlilies in moonlight were your knees).

It was that night I heard you singing  
In the green'room after your dance was over,  
Faint and uneven through the thickness of walls.

(How shall I come to you through the dullness of walls,  
Thrusting aside the hands of bitter opinion?)

It was that afternoon, early in June,  
When, tired with a sleepless night, and my act performed,  
Feeling as stale as streets,

We met under dropping boughs, and you smiled to me :  
And we sat by a watery surface of clouds and sky.

I hear only the susurrations of intimate leaves ;  
The stealthy gliding of branches upon slow air.



I see only the point of your chin in sunlight ;  
And the sinister blue of sunlight on your hair.

The sunlight settles downward upon us in silence.

Now we thrust up through grass'blades and encounter,  
Pushing white hands amid the green.  
Your face flowers whitely among cold leaves.  
Soil clings to you, bark falls from you,  
You rouse and stretch upward, exhaling earth, inhaling sky,  
I touch you, and we drift off together like moons.  
Earth dips from under.

We are alone in an immensity of sunlight,  
Specks in an infinite golden radiance,  
Whirled and tossed upon cataracts and silent torrents.  
Give me your hands, darling ! We float downward.

#### XIV. BOARDMAN AND COFFIN

I told him straight, if he touched me, just once more, —  
That way, you know, — I 'd kill him. And I did.  
Why should n't I ? I told him straight I would.  
And here I am ! — And I hope to God I die.  
You would n't think this hand could hit so hard, —  
Look, there 's still powder on it, and rouge on the nails !  
Maybe it 's blood. — I told him, if he touched me ! —  
And he 'd come grinning up, and think, because  
The house was watching everything we did,  
That he could touch me, while he danced with me, —  
That way, you know, — and get away with it. . . .  
Well, you can't say I did n't give him warning.  
My God, I hated him! The things he did!  
You would n't believe them if I told them to you,  
They were so nasty. They almost killed me, — killed  
me, —  
Night after night ! — Well, anyway, he 's dead,  
Dead as a stick, or a stone, or an old cigar 'butt.  
You would n't think I would do a thing like that, —  
I don't look strong, do I?— But when you 're dancing,  
You've got to keep in shape. And then, my God! —  
When he came leering downward with those eyes,  
Those red'brown eyes, like fire, like a vampire's eyes,  
I thought I 'd scream, go mad, or fling myself  
Over the footlights, into the orchestra, —  
Anywhere, anywhere,— only to get away!

They were like wheels of fire, those eyes of his, —  
Whirling and whirling, and always getting bigger ;  
Like terrible doors, with fires roaring inside them,  
Roaring and roaring, and always coming nearer, —  
And sort of sucking at me, and pulling my dress,  
And pressing hot cruel fingers against my breasts,  
And blowing my hair up, and pushing against my knees, —  
And all the while laughing and laughing at me !  
O, it was terrible, terrible, — like a nightmare,  
Slowly leaning downward upon you and crushing,  
And your heart stops beating, and you can't move a finger,  
But lie there sweating ! —

I had to kill him, — that 's all, — I had to kill him.  
I told him straight, if he touched me just once more, —  
That way, you know, — I 'd kill him. And I did.  
Those fire'wheel eyes ! Do you know what I thought I was  
doing ?  
Well, when they came down, bigger and bigger, and whirl'  
ing,  
Whirling so fast, with fire all round the rims,  
And the spokes all going so quick you could n't see them,  
Only a sort of blur, — I thought I 'd stop them,  
By suddenly sticking a knife in through the spokes!  
And I did. And all of a sudden the music stopped —  
Just like grand opera ! And he was kneeling there,  
Putting his hands down, sort of groping, and nodding,  
As if he were looking for something. Ha ! A joke.  
And seeing that he was done for, I stabbed myself:  
A Jap I knew once showed me how to do it.  
And I heard great bells go roaring down the darkness ;  
And a wind rushed after them. And that was all.

#### XV. DANCING ADAIRS

Behold me, in my chiffon, gauze, and tinsel,  
Flitting out of the shadow into the spotlight,  
And into the shadow again, without a whisper ! —  
Firefly 's my name. I am evanescent.

Firefly 's your name. You are evanescent.  
But I follow you as remorselessly as darkness,  
And shut you in and enclose you, at last, and always,  
Till you are lost, — as a voice is lost in silence.

Till I am lost, as a voice is lost in silence. . . .  
Are you the one who would close so cool about me ?

My fire sheds into and through you and beyond you :  
How can your fingers hold me ? I am elusive.

How can my fingers hold you? You are elusive ?  
Yes, you are flame ; but I surround and love you,  
Always extend beyond you, cool, eternal,  
To take you into my heart's great void of silence.

You shut me into your heart's great void of silence. . . .  
O sweet and soothing end for a life of whirling !  
Now I am still, whose life was mazed with motion.  
Now I sink into you, for love of sleep.

Project Gutenberg's etext of

# **GREEN GREW THE LASSES,**

by Ruth Laura Wainwright

[Transcriber's Note: This etext was produced from  
Galaxy Science Fiction July 1953.

Extensive research did not uncover any evidence that  
the U.S. copyright on this publication was renewed.]

*Since evils cancel out, avoid odd numbers of  
them ... even if you have to get an odder one!*

The September evening was hot and humid, and Helen Raymond, watching her husband pace nervously about the living room, grew tenser by the minute. Robert would walk up to an open window, sniff abstractedly, move to the next window, and repeat the performance.

"For goodness' sakes, Robert, what \_are\_ you snuffling about?" she finally demanded in exasperation. She had been on edge ever since her cousin Dora had arrived that afternoon. Dora had lost another of a long succession of short-lived jobs and, as usual, had descended on them without warning for an indefinite visit. Wasn't it enough to have to bear, that and the heat, too, without Robert's acting up?

"Smog's getting worse all the time," Robert complained.

Dora lifted her nose to sniff daintily. "It \_is\_ an odd smog. Now in New York we don't--" Her voice trailed off and left the sentence hanging as she drew in another sample of the night air.

Helen sniffed, too. "We look like a bunch of rabbits," she thought irritably. But Dora was right. It was an odd smog, sort of sweet and bitter at the same time. Not sulphuric like most of the smog they were used to, or the spoiled-onions-frying-in-rancid-fat smell of oil wells when the wind was off the land. This odor made her think of rank tropical weeds, a jungle miasma, though she had never been near a jungle.

\* \* \* \* \*

There was something familiar about it, though, and then she remembered

that her hands had smelled like that the morning after she had weeded the tiny garden alongside their house. The flowerbed had been cluttered with weeds of a kind she had never seen before, horrible-looking things. Could they be the cause of that awful smell? They had sprung up everywhere lately, and, while she had pulled them out of their own garden, they were growing all over, and she couldn't very well weed the whole town, could she?

"I think--wait, I want to get something," she said, and ran outdoors.

She came back with a sample of the weed, one that she pulled from the garden of the vacant house next door. The plant was about a foot high, with a straight, stiff stem, of a bright metallic green, with a single row of inch-wide rosettes of chartreuse leaves or petals down one side of the stem. There could be no doubt about its being the cause of the unpleasant odor, and Helen held it out at arm's length.

"What the heck is that?" Robert asked.

"Smell!" she said.

"Phew! So that's it. What is it, anyway?"

Helen shook her head. "Never saw anything like it until recently. I pulled 'em out of our garden, but they're all over."

Helen carried the offending plant to the back door. When she came back, Robert peered at her intently, shut his eyes and shook his head quickly, and then stared at her again.

"Think you'll know me next time you see me?" she asked, annoyed.

"First good look I've had at you this evening. What kind of face powder is that you're using? Don't tell me that peculiar shade is the latest fashion?"

Puzzled, Helen put her hand to her face as if she should be able to feel the color.

"Mom's green!" chortled eight-year-old Bobby. "You ought to see yourself!"

"Green?" Helen asked worriedly.

"Green," Robert said. "You feel all right?"

"Anemia," Dora declared positively. "You don't eat properly. Not enough vitamins. Now, while I'm here--"

A quick look in the mirror, and Helen told herself that she wasn't really a \_green\_ green, just sort of greenish, if you looked at her in the right light. By morning, the odd color ought to be all gone. There was no sense in worrying. Anybody could look sort of off-color now and then. Maybe Dora was right--she was anemic.

\* \* \* \* \*

But she was stunned by the first sight of herself in the mirror the next morning. There was no mistaking it this time. She was as green as grass, and Dora, too, was beginning to show signs of becoming that unbecoming color.

Reluctantly, Dora conceded that it might not be the diet, after all. She hadn't been there long enough for it to have that much effect.

Robert and Bobby were still shockingly normal.

"What--whatever can it be?" Helen asked shakily, holding out her green hands. The only answer was hysterical screaming that sent them all racing to the front door.

The Raymonds lived in a typical California court, with four small houses facing four other small houses across a central walk that ran at right angles to the street. On this walk most of the tenants were now gathered, and the Raymonds and Dora joined them.

Helen didn't know whether to feel relieved or more dismayed when she saw that all the women and girls were as green as she, and just as terrified.

Someone, of course, had called the police, and a prowl car hummed to a stop at the curb. A harrassed, white-faced policeman leaned out of the window.

"We're doing all we can," he called. "It's like this all over town. Don't know yet what caused it, but we're investigating." The car sped away.

It was soon apparent that only Mimosa Beach was affected. Why, no one could guess. Some said it was all a publicity stunt of some kind, advertising a movie or television show, or a chlorophyll product, perhaps, but they couldn't explain how it worked, or why only women and girls were affected. And how could it possibly help sell anything?

Overnight, Mimosa Beach became famous, and infested with reporters and color photographers, all male. There would have been a mass exodus if

there had been any place to go. But other communities, fearing that their womenfolk would "catch" the greenness, like measles, refused to let them in. Besides, in Mimosa Beach they had the dubious comfort of all being alike, while elsewhere they would have been freaks.

There was so little they could do to make themselves look attractive. The cosmetics they had or that were available were all wrong. But they did the best they could, though there was no hiding that ghastly green complexion.

"What a shame your hair isn't red," Dora said one day to Helen. "Amy Olson, now, her hair really goes with green skin." Cocking her head to one side, she studied the younger woman intently. "Your hair--that mousy brown--wonder if we couldn't touch it up just a \_wee\_ bit?"

Helen clenched her teeth against the coy, criticizing voice. "I'm not the flamboyant type," she said.

Dora was as green as Helen by this time, and it certainly wasn't a bit more becoming to her. She seemed to be enjoying the publicity, though. Besides, it gave her a good excuse for not leaving.

If only the greenness had come before Dora--they might have been spared \_one\_ calamity!

\* \* \* \* \*

Four girls moved into the house next to the Raymonds, the last house in the row.

Neither the Raymonds nor Dora noticed that they had moved in; they came so quietly. The houses in the court were furnished and they must have paid the rent, obtained the keys, and walked in, all settled as soon as they closed the door behind them. It wasn't until they rang the Raymonds' doorbell in the early evening that anyone in the household was aware of them.

"We move next door," one of them said brightly to Helen when she answered the door. "We come see you, get acquainted. We come in?"

"Of course," Helen said, and they trooped in. "We're the Raymonds, and this is my cousin, Dora Hastings."

The new neighbor who had spoken first pointed to her companions, one by one. "Patricia Pontiac," she said. "Clara Ford. Mary Maroon. Me," poking a thumb at her own midriff, "Jack Jones."

"Jack Jones?" Helen repeated. "That's a man's name."

"Man?" the girl asked blankly.

"Man!" Robert said impatiently. "Like me."

The four girls noticed him for the first time, and then they saw Bobby. They stared at the two of them, their mouths slightly open, their eyes wide with horror. They drew closer to each other, as if for protection, and shivered.

Robert and Bobby looked at each other in bewildered embarrassment.

"My husband and son," Helen said tartly. Did these odd creatures think all males were wolves, including eight-year-old Bobby?

"That--that color!" Mary Maroon quavered. "Not green!"

"Only dames are green," Bobby scornfully said.

"Imagine!" Dora giggled nervously. "Afraid of Robert and Bobby!"

"Won't you sit down?" Helen asked. This nonsense of being scared of her menfolk had gone on long enough. She didn't want them to sit down. She wanted them to go. But she could hardly ask them to do that.

Naturally, they sat down.

Bobby turned on the television for a space opera, and the four new neighbors watched it avidly. When the spaceship landed on what was supposed to be Venus, they giggled behind their hands and looked at each other sidewise. Hadn't they ever seen a show like that before? What was so unusually funny about this one?

When the commercial came on, Robert turned off the sound. Mary Maroon looked at Bobby, and then at Helen, who was sitting with her arm around her son.

"You--baby?" she asked.

Helen smiled proudly. "Yes, this is my baby."

Bobby squirmed indignantly.

Mary Maroon then turned to Robert. "You got baby?"

Robert said, "Sure, this is my baby," patting Bobby on the knee. To Helen, he muttered, "What does she think, anyway?"



The four stared at Robert and Bobby and Helen in such obvious confusion that Robert jumped up nervously to turn the sound back on.

\* \* \* \* \*

After the girls had gone home, Bobby was sent off to bed, and Robert, loosening his tie, demanded, "What's the matter with them, anyhow? Do they have to stare at me as if I were a damned biological error? Don't they know what a man is, for heaven's sake?"

"Really, Robert," Dora protested, blushing a deeper green.

"Well, for gosh sakes--"

"Those names!" Helen said. "Clara Ford, that's not too bad. I'm not so sure about Mary Maroon."

Dora nodded. "Mary White. Mary Black. So why not Mary Maroon? But Patricia Pontiac!"

Helen threw up her hands. "They must have made that one up. But \_Jack Jones\_!"

"Crazy, if you ask me," Robert said, "pretending they were scared of me and Bobby."

"There's a Patricia Beauty Shoppe next to the Pontiac agency," Dora suggested. "Maybe--"

"Funny way to get a name. Where the heck are they from?" Robert wondered.

"Must be from right here in town," Helen reminded him. "Otherwise they wouldn't be green."

"You know, the greenness looks sort of natural on them," Dora said thoughtfully. "Well, think I'll go to bed."

After she had gone, Helen said wistfully in a whisper, "If only awful things could sort of counteract each other the way some poisons do." She started making up the davenport bed; Dora had their room. "First Dora's coming, and our turning green, and now those crazy girls right next door. But three poisons--no, it wouldn't come out even."

\* \* \* \* \*

It was a day or two later when Helen found her new neighbors working in the little flowerbed alongside their house. They were busily

transplanting weeds of the kind responsible for the unpleasant odor.

"For goodness' sake!" Helen exclaimed, disgusted. "What in the world do you want with that stuff? Why, it took the rest of us here in the court days to get it all out and now you want to bring it back. Throw it away!"

"Oh, no!" Patricia Pontiac objected, holding a bunch of the weeds against her heart protectingly. "It's faneweed!"

"You mean you've seen the stuff before?"

Patricia nodded. "We have it all over where we came from. Must have faneweed."

"But you couldn't have come from some place else," Helen pointed out. "You wouldn't be green if you did."

"All green where we come from," Mary Maroon said.

"I don't know where that stuff--faneweed, you call it?--came from," Helen said, refusing to pay any attention to their claim that they came from some place else where everyone was green. There just wasn't any such place!

"We drop seed other time we come," Patricia said. Then she added indignantly, "You no believe we come from other place?"

"What other place?" asked Helen, with weary politeness.

"You call it Venus."

"That picture the other night," Clara Ford giggled. "Not like Venus at all. So funny!"

Helen could stand no more. "So are you!" she said rudely, and went into the house.

They were even crazier than she'd thought. Greener, too, when you saw them in broad daylight. Did the greenness affect the mind, and the greener you got, the zanier you became? Would she get to be like that? The idea frightened her.

"No turn green?" Patricia Pontiac asked Robert plaintively one day, as if she were blaming him for her bewilderment.

"No!" he answered shortly. "But I don't blame you for envying us men. It must be tough to be that lousy-looking color."

"Green is \_good\_ color!" Mary Maroon declared stoutly. "You no have baby yourself?"

"Of course not!"

Patricia turned to Helen. "Then what she for?"

"\_He!\_" Robert corrected, and then added sarcastically, "Papa works to buy baby shoes. Now, does that answer your question?"

Helen sighed. There was just no use trying to explain anything to those four girls.

\* \* \* \* \*

Fall and winter passed. The dull monotony of being green was accented now and then by articles and pictures in newspapers and magazines, and by rumors, always proved false, that a remedy had been found, though chemists, biologists and doctors continued hunting for the cause of the catastrophe. Autopsies provided no clue. Women protested that the doctors were looking at them with a wishful drop-dead expression, as if the \_next\_ autopsy might be the one that would supply the answer.

The greenness was still confined to Mimosa Beach. Other communities kept up their quarantine. The four girls next door to the Raymonds were as zany as ever, and Dora Hastings stayed on, of necessity.

And then the monotony was broken by greater calamities.

First, there was the matter of Patricia Pontiac's approaching motherhood. While this, of course, made no difference as far as the town was concerned, Dora was greatly perturbed, and, ever being one to insist on others keeping within the limits of her own narrow paths, she took the girl to task.

"Patricia," she insisted sternly, "there simply \_must\_ be a man to blame for your condition! You \_must\_ marry him. Think of the baby! You want him to be fatherless?"

"Fatherless? Him?" Patricia repeated, frowning in perplexity. "What you talking about? My little baby girl all mine. This man business I don't understand."

"Nonsense! You're just trying to pretend innocence."

"Oh, give it up, Dora," Helen urged wearily. "She doesn't know what you're talking about."

Dora raised skeptical eyebrows. "In \_her\_ condition?"

After that, Dora went around with a great air of virtue condescending to help the wayward. It must be a burden, Helen felt, to have to feel superior because of other people's faults. Such a negative sort of superiority.

\* \* \* \* \*

During the next few weeks, Dora had plenty of chance to feel superior. Other unmarried girls and women besides Patricia became pregnant and, like Patricia, they insisted no man was responsible. But they were not complacent about it the way Patricia was; to them it was an indignity they did not deserve.

"What's this town coming to, anyway?" Dora demanded.

"Parthenogenetic births, maybe?" Helen ventured. "No one would have believed that we'd turn green, but we did. Honestly, Dora, I'm getting so I'd believe almost anything in this nightmare existence of ours, even that \_you\_ were about to have a baby!"

"That," Dora rejoined acidly, "is not at all likely. But are you trying to imply that our turning green could have something to do with these shameful births?"

"I didn't say that, but you could be right."

"Hmmp!" Dora snorted. "A lot of nonsense!"

The four girls were in the Raymonds' living room one afternoon, a week later, talking with Helen, when Dora, who had been feeling ill and had gone to the doctor's, walked in. She glared at the four girls.

"I'm going to have a baby," she accused them.

Helen drew her breath in sharply. "Oh, no! Not you, too!"

"Of course," Clara Ford said complacently. "Every one have babies. Except Robert and Bobby and the ones like them. Jack and Mary and I have ours before we leave Venus. Have only one each, of course."

"But why am \_I\_ like this? How can \_I\_ have a baby this way?" Dora's voice was shrill with anger and panic.

"How else?" Jack asked calmly.

A little chill of horror raced down Helen's spine. Could these odd girls really be telling the truth? Were they from Venus, as they insisted? She could just imagine them coming to Earth--on a Flying Saucer, maybe--listening to the radio to learn the language. Spying on us, but not learning as much as they thought they did. She choked off a giggle, an incipient hysteria, as another thought struck her.

"Will I have one of those--those--?"

"You already have baby," Patricia said. "Can't see how you have baby before we come with faneweed to make you green."

Helen and Dora stared at her.

"You mean," Helen finally was able to ask, "that that weed caused all this? That little weed?"

"But that is what we tell you all along, only you always walk away angry."

\* \* \* \* \*

All those scientists working so hard, Helen realized bitterly, and all the time what they were looking for was literally under their feet! How could anyone have thought that the faneweed was responsible for anything but the bad smell they had finally become accustomed to?

"Why didn't I listen to these girls, pay more attention to what they said?" Helen asked herself. She might have been able to prevent a lot of things that had happened. She got up from her chair and walked nervously about. Well, she couldn't change the past, but she could stop further evil from the faneweed.

"I'll bet they don't have men on Venus," she said to Dora, "judging from the way they act. Then they'd have to have parthenogenetic births."

She turned to Patricia. "Why did you come to Earth? And why just to Mimosa Beach?"

"We try little place, what you call sample, before we change whole world," Patricia explained. And then she added sadly, "So many of our babies die. Not enough people left on Venus. We think maybe you like to come to Venus with us, so we make you as us."

"That was very, very wicked of you!" Dora said severely.

The four Venusians shrugged resignedly.

"Might as well go home," Mary Maroon said. "They don't like it our way."

"And leave me like this?" Dora demanded shrilly.

"Get rid of faneweed, be as before," Patricia assured her.

"With a baby I'll have trouble accounting for," Dora said bitterly.

"Oh, no, you don't. You stay right here. And, Helen, don't you tell anybody that it's the faneweed. Then people from other places won't know about my baby, and it won't matter here as long as things are the way they are."

"You come with us," Clara suggested wheedlingly. "You'll like Venus. Venus so pretty! No work, all happiness!"

"No work? No wonder the babies die!" Dora exclaimed.

Helen could see the yeast of reform beginning to work in Dora. The four Venusians looked puzzled. "They do that all the time," Helen thought irritably. Aloud, she said, "Dora, of course I have to tell about the faneweed. There are others involved, you know."

"I don't suppose," Dora interrupted, "that you girls know anything about diet. Those babies could probably be saved with a little intelligence and some hard work."

\* \* \* \* \*

When the four Venusians left shortly thereafter for their home, they took along Dora Hastings, who had great plans for their planet.

With the faneweed on Earth destroyed, the women and girls of Mimosa Beach returned to their original color. Even the parthenogenetic baby girls born as a result of the unfortunate experiment of the Venusians were white.

"Well, the bad things went in pairs, after all," Helen said to Robert when everything was normal again. "The faneweed was the fourth evil, though we didn't know it. And when we got rid of the faneweed, the greenness left. The Venusians went away and--and I do hope Dora's all right!"

"She finally got what should be a lifetime job," Robert answered. He crossed his fingers and, looking out of a western window at Venus, bright against the darkening sky, added, "At least, Venus is farther away than New York. That ought to help."

## **A DINNER DATE WITH MURDER**

by Harry Stein

from The Project Gutenberg EBook of *Hooded Detective, Volume III No. 2, January, 1942*, by Various

It was long past the dinner hour and too early for the after theatre crowd. The two men at the table near the door were the only patrons in Luigi's restaurant. They had eaten and were sitting there drinking wine. They drank very slowly and it was plain that they were waiting for somebody because they weren't talking much and had the half bored, half impatient look of people who have nothing to do but wait. At a table near the back of the room the waiter, who seemed to be the only one on duty, sat smoking a black twisted cigar and reading a newspaper.

One of the men put his wine glass down and lit a cigarette. Even sitting down he was noticeably shorter than his companion but he was powerfully built. He had a deep olive complexion and eyes that were black and sparkling.

"It looks like your man isn't coming, Dan," he said.

"Don't worry about that, Gatti," Dan said. "He'll turn up. He knows the trail's hot and he'd rather be a live rat than a dead kidnapper."

Gatti shook his head slowly. "I don't know," he said vaguely. "You say you'll know if it's the same one that phoned. How can you be sure?"

"The accent. It's unmistakable. A deep voice and an accent like a vaudeville dialectician's."

Gatti refilled their glasses from the green bottle on the table. Then they were silent.

The front door opened and two men entered. One was fat with a complexion the color of old weather beaten brick and eyes that were watery and cold. He wore a high crowned, pearl grey fedora, set squarely on his head and his fleecy coat had heavily padded shoulders. The other man was slight and sallow. His coat was too tight across his back and he walked with a defiant swagger. They hung their hats and coats on the rack and sat down two tables away from the one at which Dan and Gatti were sitting. The waiter put down his cigar and came to their table, bowing slightly.

"Spaghetti wid' a meat sauce," the stout man ordered loudly, "an' a bottle a' Chianti."

"Same," the small man said laconically.

The waiter went off without a word. The two men lit cigarettes. Dan and Gatti watched them with open curiosity, waiting for some sign but they smoked in silence, never looking in the direction of the other table.

"It's the organ grinder accent all right," Gatti said in a barely audible voice. "But where's the high sign?"

"Give him a chance," Dan mumbled. "He has to be plenty careful, I suppose."

The waiter came in with a wicker wrapped bottle which he set on the table before the newcomers. Then he went back to the kitchen and when he returned he brought two heaping plates of spaghetti, dripping reddish brown sauce and giving off a fragrant steam.

"The idea is to talk on a full stomach, I suppose," Gatti whispered. "Or isn't he the guy? I thought your man was coming alone."

"He didn't say," Dan said.

Gatti watched the fat, red faced man wielding fork and knife, eating the spaghetti with great relish.

"Dat's a pretty good a' spaghetti, eh Joe?" the fat man said loudly.

"Right," Joe replied briefly.

Dan looked toward the back of the room where the waiter was again occupied with his cigar and paper. Maybe they're waiting for the waiter to clear out first, he was thinking. He sipped at his wine, waiting.... Then he looked up again. The stout man had almost finished what was on his plate and was taking a long drink from his wine glass. He put the glass down and sat back in his chair. He turned his watery eyes on Dan and nodded his head slowly up and down ... up and down. Dan glanced quickly at Gatti who had his elbow on the table and seemed to be sleepily leaning far over to one side of his chair. Then he nodded his head at the stout man just as the latter had done.

The next instant he was on the floor and somewhere over his head, repeated claps of thunder were bursting as if they would never cease and from the other table he heard a choked scream. His ears hurt in the silence that followed.

\* \* \* \* \*

When he rose from the floor Gatti, gun in hand, was already standing at the side of the two men who a little while before had been enjoying their spaghetti and were now dead. The waiter had disappeared. Dan took



a revolver from the lifeless hand of the small, sallow faced man. He looked at the chambers. All the cartridges were neatly in place.

"He never had a chance to use it," Gatti explained.

The door opened again. A man with his hat drawn down low over his eyes, stood in the doorway and looked wildly about at the dead men and at Dan and Gatti. Then he turned around frantically.

"Our man," Gatti cried.

He leaped forward, grabbed the fleeing man by the elbow and jerked him violently into the room.

"You wanted to see us," Gatti said. "You phoned the lieutenant, didn't you?"

Every feature of the man's face was distorted with terror. Gatti shook him.

"This is the lieutenant," he said pointing to Dan. "What were you going to tell him?"

The man was looking at the corpses with a slow, steady gaze. His face was more composed now.

"Sure," he said in a deep, resonant voice. "Dey a' deada now, yes? I no hava ta be afraid, yes?"

"That's right, they're dead," Dan said. "Where have they been keeping the kid?"

The man drew a piece of paper from his pocket. Dan read the address on it and put it in his own pocket.

"Who are they?" he asked pointing to the bodies.

The man was calm now.

"Dat's a' Rocky Callahan," he said, "an'a da leetle wan he's a Joe Baker. I was a' gon' ta tell you. I was a' gon' ta--how you say--walk out on a' dem."

"Rocky Callahan from Detroit!" Dan said in surprise. "You mean the fat feller."

"Dat's a'right."

"Sucker," Gatti chuckled.

"Yeah," Dan said wryly. "But what started the target practice?"

"He pulled a rod on us," Gatti said.

"Who?"

"Joe Baker, the little guy."

"I didn't see it."

"Sure, because you weren't looking for it."

"I was looking at them."

"Baker had it under the table in the hand he wasn't eating with. You couldn't notice unless you bent down to look under the flap of their tablecloth. They must have found out their pal here was going to sing and figured he probably told us too much already. They counted on getting him later."

Dan nodded reflectively. "But what I want to know," he said, "is how you happened to be looking under their table."

Gatti chuckled some more.

"I was just making sure," he said. "Guys named Callahan shouldn't try to eat spaghetti. He might have palmed off the accent but nobody with a real accent like that would cut up his spaghetti with a knife and pick up tiny pieces on his fork."

"What's wrong with that?" Dan wanted to know.

Gatti gave him a look of contempt. "You eat spaghetti with a fork and a tablespoon to help you wind it around the fork and you eat it full length or it isn't worth eating."

"You dam' right," Gatti's prisoner put in belligerently. His fear and humility were completely gone now. "Dat's a' da only way ta eata him."



*PD Weekly by Matt Pierard, Creative Commons Non-Commercial Copyright 2017*